



General Assembly

Fifty-eighth session

Official Records

Distr.: General
21 October 2003

Original: English

Fifth Committee

Summary record of the 5th meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Tuesday, 14 October 2003, at 10 a.m.

Chairman: Mr. Kmoníček (Czech Republic)
Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. Mselle

Contents

Agenda item 124: Scale of assessment for the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations (*continued*)

Agenda item 125: Pattern of conferences (*continued*)

This record is subject to correction. Corrections should be sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned *within one week of the date of publication* to the Chief of the Official Records Editing Section, room DC2-750, 2 United Nations Plaza, and incorporated in a copy of the record.

Corrections will be issued after the end of the session, in a separate corrigendum for each Committee.



The meeting was called to order at 10 05 a.m.

Agenda item 124: Scale of assessments for the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations
(continued) (A/56/767; A/58/11, A/58/63 and A/58/189)

1. **Mr. Sessi** (Chairman of the Committee on Contributions), introducing the report of the Committee on Contributions (A/58/11), said that at its sixty-third session the Committee on Contributions had focused on the scale of assessments for the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations for the period 2004-2006.
2. Based on the decision of the General Assembly contained in resolution 55/5 B, the Committee on Contributions had decided to review the scale of assessments for the period 2004-2006 on the basis of the elements of the methodology for the scale of assessments for the period 2001-2003. That methodology, together with information on its evolution, was contained in annexes I and II to the report. In considering the scale of assessments for 2004-2006, the Committee had made use of statistical information for the period 1996-2001 provided by the Secretariat and a number of Member States. Further details were to be found in chapter II, sections B and C of the report.
3. With regard to gross national income, he drew attention to paragraph 20 of the report. Member States were in the process of moving from the System of National Accounts, 1968 (1968 SNA) to the System of National Accounts, 1993 (1993 SNA). The renaming of the concept of gross national product (GNP) as gross national income (GNI) merely represented a refinement of product and income concepts and did not entail any change in the actual coverage of the concept. Given that Member States with 92 per cent of world GDP had implemented the 1993 SNA by May 2003, the Committee had used GNI as the income measure for the 2004-2006 scale.
4. With regard to conversion rates, he said that the Committee had had to determine whether any of the market exchange rates (MERs) used to convert GNI data into United States dollars had caused excessive fluctuations and distortions in the income of some Member States and, if so, which alternative rates should be used. Following a comprehensive review of information provided by a number of Member States and of the situation of countries whose rates had been

adjusted for the purposes of the 2001-2003 scale, countries for which there appeared to be a serious disparity between real growth of GNI and growth of GNI in United States dollar terms, and countries for which the revised methodology for price-adjusted rates of exchange (PAREs) had shown distortions during the base period for the scale, the Committee had decided to replace some or all MERs for Argentina, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, the Syrian Arab Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela. However, he noted that some members of the Committee had expressed strong reservations regarding the decision to apply PAREs to some of the data for Argentina.

5. Once the Committee had decided on the data to be used in calculating the scale of assessments for 2004-2006, it had applied the elements of the methodology outlined in paragraph I of resolution 55/5 B. However, the scale of assessments for 2001-2003 had reflected a number of additional adjustments, including transitional measures for Member States experiencing sharp increases in their rates of assessment and the distribution of an additional payment by the United States of America for 2001, which had not been included in paragraph I of resolution 55/5 B and had not therefore been reflected in the methodology applied by the Committee on Contributions for the scale of assessments for 2004-2006. The Committee had agreed to recommend to the General Assembly the scale of assessments for 2004-2006 set out in paragraph 42 of its report.

6. Turning to the issue of multi-year payment plans, he recalled that, in its resolution 57/4 B, the General Assembly had endorsed the conclusions of the Committee on Contributions concerning multi-year payment plans. Chapter IV of the Committee's current report contained the results of its review of the Secretary-General's most recent report on multi-year payment plans (A/58/63) and updated information on the plans submitted as at 27 June 2003. All plans submitted had also been considered in the context of requests for exemption under Article 19 of the Charter; further information on that issue was contained in chapter V of the report. The Committee had recommended that the General Assembly should encourage Member States in arrears to consider submitting payment plans. It had noted with appreciation the substantial effort made by some of the

Member States concerned to reduce their arrears and urged them to make every effort to meet the commitments set out in their payment plans.

7. Pursuant to its mandate under rule 160 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, the Committee on Contributions had considered a number of requests for exemption under Article 19 of the Charter. Four of the Member States requesting exemption had also presented multi-year payment plans, and the Committee had encouraged all Member States requesting an exemption under Article 19 to consider presenting such a plan if they were in a position to do so and to provide as much information as possible in support of their requests.

8. At the conclusion of the sixty-third session of the Committee on Contributions, 16 Member States were affected by the provisions of Article 19. Four Member States had subsequently paid the amount necessary to restore their vote in the General Assembly, and there were now 12 Member States, namely, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Comoros, Georgia, Guinea-Bissau, Iraq, Liberia, Niger, the Republic of Moldova, Sao Tome and Principe, Somalia and Tajikistan which were currently subject to the provisions of Article 19 and, in the absence of any further decisions on that issue by the General Assembly, would have no vote in the General Assembly.

9. In its resolution 57/4 C, the General Assembly had also requested the Committee on Contributions to make recommendations on measures with a positive impact to encourage Member States to pay their arrears, and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its fifty-eighth session. In that connection, the Committee had recalled its extensive consideration of such measures at recent sessions and decided to consider the matter further at its next session, in the light of any guidance from the General Assembly and updated information on the experience of other organizations of the United Nations system, and to report further to the Assembly before the end of the current session.

10. With regard to the criteria for the ad hoc adjustment of the rates of assessment, the Committee had reviewed information concerning earlier appeals for adjustments by Member States and agreed that it should consider the matter further at its next session. Following its initial review, however, the Committee had agreed that the circumstances surrounding such

requests should be truly exceptional and extraordinary and that such requests should be based on the fullest possible information on the exceptional and extraordinary nature of the action being requested.

11. At its sixty-first session, the Committee on Contributions had decided to consider the question of the assessment of non-member States. The current methodology involved the calculation of a flat annual fee for non-member States that participated fully in some activities financed by the regular budget of the United Nations. That fee was based on the total net assessment for the regular budget, a notional rate of assessment, fixed by the General Assembly, and a flat annual fee percentage, reviewed every five years, based on the non-member State's level of participation in activities financed by the regular budget.

12. The only non-member State which was still assessed under those arrangements was the Holy See and, given that its notional rate of assessment had been fixed at 0.001 per cent, the current system seemed unnecessarily cumbersome and costly. The Secretariat had therefore proposed, and the Holy See had agreed, that the flat annual fee percentage should be fixed at 50 per cent of the notional rate of assessment without further periodic review. The Committee had agreed to that arrangement and had recommended that the General Assembly should fix the flat annual fee percentage of the Holy See at 50 per cent of the notional rate of assessment and suspend further periodic review. It had also recommended that the notional rate of assessment for the Holy See for 2004-2006 should be fixed at 0.001 per cent.

13. Lastly, the Committee had noted that, pursuant to the provisions of paragraph 8 (a) of General Assembly resolution 55/5 B, in 2002 the Secretary-General had accepted the equivalent of over US \$1.7 million in four non-United States dollar currencies acceptable to the Organization.

14. **Mr. Halbwachs** (Controller), introducing the report of the Secretary-General on multi-year payment plans (A/58/63), said that, in its resolution 56/243 A, the General Assembly had recognized that multi-year payment plans could be helpful in allowing Member States to demonstrate their commitment under Article 19 of the Charter to paying their arrears, thereby facilitating consideration of applications for exemption by the Committee on Contributions. The Assembly had also requested the Secretary-General to propose

guidelines for such payment plans through the Committee on Contributions. Having reviewed the relevant report of the Secretary-General (A/57/65), the Committee on Contributions had agreed on a number of conclusions and recommendations, which were contained in paragraphs 17 to 23 of its report on its sixty-second session (A/57/11). In its resolution 57/4 B, the General Assembly had endorsed those conclusions and recommendations.

15. Four payment plans had been submitted prior to the adoption of resolution 57/4 B. No additional plans had been submitted at the time the report had been prepared, although Georgia had subsequently submitted a further revision of its plan and the Central African Republic and Niger had indicated their intention to submit payment plans at a later date. With regard to the four existing payment plans, one Member State had significantly exceeded its planned payment, two had more or less met their commitments and one had paid significantly less than the amount foreseen.

16. Turning to the note by the Secretary-General concerning the outstanding assessed contributions of the former Yugoslavia (A/58/189), he said that, in a letter dated 27 December 2001 addressed to the President of the General Assembly (A/56/767), the Secretary-General had drawn the Assembly's attention to the question of the arrears of the former Yugoslavia, following its dissolution and the termination of its membership in the United Nations. In that letter, he had indicated that it would be necessary for the Assembly to take a decision with regard to the treatment of those arrears. Relevant information had been provided in an annex to the letter.

17. Since the date of that letter, the General Assembly had decided to return to Member States credits in respect of the unencumbered balances of a number of peacekeeping operations for which the former Yugoslavia had been assessed. Following the application of its share of those credits, the amount of the outstanding assessed contributions of the former Yugoslavia had been somewhat reduced. In that connection, the Secretary-General's note provided updated information on the unpaid assessed contributions of the former Yugoslavia with a view to assisting the Assembly in its further consideration of the question.

18. **Mr. Haraguchi** (Japan) said that, in order to play its role of promoting peace and stability in the world,

the United Nations must be in a position to carry out activities worthy of the trust and support of Member States and their peoples. In Japan, however, an increasing number of taxpayers believed that their country was being unfairly treated in the United Nations. It was not clear to them why Japan should bear nearly 20 per cent of the Organization's expenses, and there were doubts concerning the current scale methodology, including the various reductions and the ceiling. That sense of unfairness had been aggravated by the stagnation of the Security Council reform process and the retention in the Charter of the so-called "enemy States" clause.

19. True United Nations reform must lead to a system of world governance that was both legitimate and fair. Equitable burden sharing among Member States was a prerequisite for achieving that objective. There was a need for a more balanced scale of assessments, which would reflect each Member State's actual economic performance, as well as its status and responsibilities in the United Nations.

20. With regard to the scale of assessments for the period 2004-2006, his delegation was not convinced that the recommendations of the Committee on Contributions concerning exchange rates were entirely consistent with the current scale methodology, as set out in General Assembly resolution 55/5 B, and it regretted that some decisions of the Committee on Contributions had been influenced by political factors.

21. **Mr. Martini** (Italy) speaking on behalf of the European Union, the acceding countries Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, the associated countries Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, and, in addition, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, regretted that the Committee had not found it possible to take up the scales of assessment for both the regular and peacekeeping budgets simultaneously so that it could then move on to other issues. The reports on the scales of assessment for the regular and peacekeeping budgets provided a clear picture of the overall capacity of Member States to pay, which was the fundamental criterion for the apportionment of the expenses of the Organization. That criterion should not be subject to requests for modification, and the European Union would insist on the full application of all paragraphs of General Assembly resolution 55/235, without exception.

22. The payment of assessed contributions in full, on time and without conditions and the reimbursement of arrears were essential to putting the Organization on a sound footing. In that connection, the European Union reiterated the importance of ensuring that the procedure for granting requests for exemption under Article 19 of the Charter operated fairly and effectively. Member States intending to request exemption under Article 19 should also comply with the time limits set by the General Assembly.

23. He recalled the General Assembly's request in resolution 57/4 C that the Committee on Contributions should make recommendations on measures to encourage Member States to pay their arrears and wondered whether it might be advisable for the Assembly to give that Committee more focused instructions on specific measures, such as the charging of interest on arrears. A practice should be established that would do justice to Member States which paid their contributions in full and on time, without imposing burdensome provisions on those Member States which had genuine difficulty in meeting their financial obligations.

24. Multi-year payment plans were very relevant in that context and the European Union noted with appreciation the substantial efforts of those Member States which had submitted payment plans to reduce their arrears. It shared the view that the Committee on Contributions or the Fifth Committee should take into account the submission of a payment plan and its status of implementation when considering requests for exemption under Article 19 of the Charter.

25. **Ms. Afifi** (Morocco), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, said that she wished to reaffirm the legal obligation of all Member States to bear the financial expenses of the United Nations, in accordance with the Charter. She urged all Member States to pay their assessed contributions on time, in full and without conditions, but recognized the need to extend sympathetic understanding to those Member States that might be temporarily unable to meet their financial obligations as a result of genuine economic difficulties. She reiterated the importance of the forthcoming negotiations on the scale of assessments for the period 2004-2006 and stressed once again that the principle of capacity to pay should be the fundamental criterion governing the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations.

26. She agreed with the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee on Contributions and reaffirmed its role as the sole expert body mandated to advise the General Assembly on the question of the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations. However, she expressed concern that many developing countries had seen huge increases in their assessments for the forthcoming period, in spite of the fact that their capacity to pay was being undermined by various economic difficulties. In addition, she reiterated that multi-year payment plans should remain voluntary and should not be linked to other measures.

27. Discussions on the item in question should be conducted in a comprehensive and transparent manner in order to bring negotiations to a swift conclusion so that all efforts could be concentrated on the consideration of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005.

28. **Ms. Buchanan** (New Zealand), speaking also on behalf of Canada and Australia, said that the work on the scale of assessments had been greatly simplified by the General Assembly's decision to retain the methodology adopted in 2000 and apply it to the calculation of the scale of assessments for 2004-2006. She appreciated the report of the Committee on Contributions and acknowledged the thoughtful way in which the Committee had addressed Member States' requests for recognition of their specific circumstances. She also recognized the importance of the efforts it had made to base recommendations on technical analysis.

29. The Committee on Contributions had done Member States a great service by adopting unified recommendations on the scale of assessments for 2004-2006. The report made it clear that certain issues had been hotly debated, in particular the question of the application of PAREs to Argentina, but it was precisely because the objective facts could support more than one interpretation regarding the use of PAREs that the advisory role of the Committee on Contributions was so important. In future, it might be beneficial for that Committee to develop more specific criteria for the use of PAREs and to ensure that recommendations were made on the basis of the technical data.

30. The delegations for which she spoke were able to accept the proposed scale of assessments in its entirety and took the view that the Fifth Committee should be in a position to conclude its negotiations without undue

delay. That would not, however, preclude the possibility of a Member State voluntarily assuming a larger share of assessed contributions with the consequent practical adjustment for others.

31. Turning to the criteria for ad hoc adjustments of the rates of assessment, she urged the Committee on Contributions to return to the issue, since such criteria were needed to enable the Assembly to address future requests for adjustments.

32. Lastly, it had come as no surprise that the Committee on Contributions had been unable to identify new measures with a positive impact to encourage Member States to pay their arrears; the term "positive" was highly subjective. The General Assembly already had many ideas to work with in that area and should continue to seek new approaches to ensure the full and timely payment of contributions.

33. **Mr. de Rivero** (Peru), speaking on behalf of the Rio Group, said that, while the methodology for the preparation of the scale of assessments adopted by the General Assembly in paragraph 1 of resolution 55/5 B could be further refined, it was not the appropriate time to undertake such an exercise. The Rio Group supported the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report of the Committee on Contributions (A/58/11), which should be approved at an early stage so that the Committee could devote its full attention to the negotiations on the proposed programme budget.

34. **Mr. Eljy** (Syrian Arab Republic), speaking on behalf of the Group of Arab States, said that the Group wished to associate itself with the statement made by the representative of Morocco on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. While the Group of Arab States welcomed the report of the Committee on Contributions (A/58/11), it noted with concern that the assessments of some Arab countries had increased by up to 250 per cent. The reliance of many of those countries on a single non-renewable resource led to major fluctuations in their economies that could adversely affect their capacity to pay. In addition, the market exchange rates of the Arab countries' currencies had declined considerably in recent years, and most were facing economic difficulties owing to the slowdown of the global economy, the political tensions in the region and the imposition on some Arab States of international and unilateral economic sanctions. There was thus a need to identify the factors

that had led to the increase in the Arab countries' assessments and to consider how to rectify the situation.

35. It was vital for all Member States, especially the major contributors, to pay their assessed contributions in full, on time and without conditions. Countries with unpaid assessments must demonstrate their commitment to eliminating their arrears. However, multi-year payment plans must be voluntary and must not be linked to other measures. Moreover, the recommendations of the Committee on Contributions concerning requests from States for exemptions under Article 19 of the Charter must not contain preconditions and must be made on the basis of the available data and the economic circumstances of each State.

36. **Mr. Chaimongkol** (Thailand) said that his delegation wished to associate itself with the statement made by the representative of Morocco on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. The review of the scale of assessments for the period 2004-2006 had been conducted in a reasonably thorough and transparent manner, and his delegation supported the relevant recommendations of the Committee on Contributions. It wished, however, to emphasize the importance of the principle of capacity to pay, which should be a fundamental criterion in apportioning the expenses of the United Nations and the need to consider representations by Member States facing economic crises or extreme hardship objectively, based on the merits of the available information.

37. In order for the United Nations to fulfil its mandates and the expectations placed on it, all Member States must pay their assessed contributions in full, on time and without conditions. His delegation therefore noted with concern that, in 2002, unpaid assessments had amounted to almost \$1.7 billion. It wished to encourage Member States with unpaid assessments to submit multi-year payment plans with a view to eliminating their arrears at the earliest opportunity. Thailand, for its part, had always paid its assessed contributions in full and on time, despite its recent economic difficulties.

38. **Mr. de Alba** (Mexico) recalled that, during its fifty-fifth session, the General Assembly had carried out a comprehensive assessment of the system for the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations, which had resulted in the adoption of resolutions 55/5,

55/235 and 55/236. The consultations that had given rise to those resolutions had been complex and the resolutions reflected a delicate political balance.

39. Pursuant to those resolutions, the General Assembly had decided to suspend the revision of the methodology underlying the calculation of the scale of assessments for six years, and the Committee on Contributions had therefore drawn up a proposed scale of assessments for the period 2004-2006 on the basis of the methodology approved in 2000 and updated economic information provided by Member States.

40. In accordance with that scale, and as a reflection of the upswing in the Mexican economy, Mexico's contributions would increase by more than 75 per cent, from 1.086 to 1.899 per cent; that would make it the tenth largest contributor to the regular budget. He pointed out that, since the foundation of the United Nations, Mexico had paid its contributions in full, on time and without conditions, even when economic conditions were at their worst, and he expected the same level of commitment to the Organization from all its Member States.

41. Mexico would not necessarily be averse to future revisions of the methodology, providing that the objective of such revisions was the equitable distribution of the financial burden in accordance with Member States' capacity to pay.

42. **Ms. Yoon** Seong-mee (Republic of Korea) said that her delegation endorsed many of the recommendations of the Committee on Contributions, including those concerning the scale of assessments for the period 2004-2006. It wished to stress the importance of capacity to pay as the fundamental principle for determining Member States' assessments. While it maintained that price-adjusted rates of exchange (PAREs) should be used only in exceptional cases, it recognized that in Argentina, even before 2001, the fixed rate of exchange had led to severe distortions in the value of the peso. Under those circumstances, it could agree to the application of PAREs for two years out of the six-year base period.

43. Multi-year payment plans were a useful way for Member States to demonstrate their commitment to meeting their financial obligations to the United Nations. Her delegation wished to express appreciation to those countries that had made substantial efforts to implement their payment plans. As to the criteria for ad hoc adjustment of the rates of assessment, it looked

forward to hearing the views of the Committee on Contributions at the fifty-ninth session of the General Assembly.

44. **Mr. Zhang** Yishan (China) said that his delegation wished to associate itself with the statement made by the representative of Morocco on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. He expressed appreciation for the business-like manner in which the Committee on Contributions had conducted its work at its sixty-third session. The principle of capacity to pay had been the foundation for determining the scale of assessments since the Organization had been established. It had stood the test of time and should be maintained, since only adherence to that principle could lead to logical and equitable adjustments to the scale.

45. China's assessment for 2004-2006 would increase by 35.2 per cent compared with the previous scale period. His delegation did not object to reasonable adjustments to the scale. China was fully aware of its responsibilities to the United Nations and fulfilled its financial obligations to the Organization in line with its capacity to pay. As a permanent member of the Security Council, it had also assumed additional obligations in connection with peacekeeping. China had made great strides in its economic development, maintained a high rate of growth and improved the living standards of its people. However, it was still a developing country with a rather weak economic base, a large population and a per capita gross domestic product only one fifth of the world average in 2001.

46. Lastly, since all Member States had a stake in the determination of the new three-year scale, the matter must be resolved through democratic consultations involving all Members on an equal footing.

47. **Mr. Terzi** (Turkey) said that his delegation wished to associate itself with the statement made by the representative of Italy on behalf of the European Union. The methodology for the preparation of the scale of assessments had been fixed until 2006. His delegation believed in the merit of retaining the current methodology and applying it in determining the new scale for 2004-2006. The full and timely payment of assessed contributions was essential for the vitality of the United Nations. As the General Assembly had recognized, multi-year payment plans were a useful way for Member States to demonstrate their commitment to meeting their financial obligations to the Organization. His delegation therefore agreed that

such payment plans should be encouraged and used as a tool for reducing States' arrears. Fairness and objectivity were crucial, both in applying Article 19 of the Charter and in determining the scale of assessments.

48. **Mr. Prica** (Bosnia and Hercegovina), speaking also on behalf of Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia and Montenegro and The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, recalled that the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had ceased to exist and had been succeeded by five equal successor States. While the successor States had all been admitted to membership in the Organization, none of them had succeeded to the legal personality of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which had continued to be assessed contributions, even though all five successor States had been paying their own assessed contributions.

49. The issue was one that must be handled with great sensitivity, more because of its legal and political implications and less because of its financial ones. No precise date could be determined for the dissolution of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which was an ongoing process. The successor States, moreover, had become independent on different dates. The process was a unique one and, given the complexity of the problem and the fact that consultations were taking place between the competent ministries of the five successor States, he wished to request the General Assembly to defer consideration of the issue to its fifty-ninth session.

Agenda item 125: Pattern of conferences (continued)
(A/57/783 and A/57/809; A/58/7 and Corr.1 and Add.1, A/58/32, A/58/194 and Corr.1 and Corr.2 and A/58/213)

50. **Ms. Afifi** (Morocco), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, noted that the utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities had not yet reached the optimum level. In that connection, the Group looked forward to the forthcoming oral presentation by the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences on compliance with the request made by the General Assembly in section II.A, paragraph 2, of its resolution 57/283 B. It wished to emphasize the need to improve the current methodology for calculating the utilization factor so that it reflected the time used for informal meetings and consultations and other relevant elements. It noted with concern the proposal in paragraph 16 of the report of the Secretary-

General on the pattern of conferences (A/58/194) that the duration or the number of fully serviced meetings should be reduced. Such decisions were the responsibility of the intergovernmental bodies.

51. The Group welcomed the reaffirmation by the Committee on Conferences that the provision of conference services for meetings and consultations of regional and other major groupings of Member States, to the maximum extent possible, facilitated the work of the Main Committees of the General Assembly and other United Nations bodies and called on the Secretary-General to continue providing those services. It regretted that the percentage of meetings held by regional and other major groupings provided with interpretation in the reporting period had decreased from 98 to 92 per cent. In section II.A, paragraph 16, of its resolution 57/283 B, the General Assembly had requested the Secretary-General to submit a report on the cost implications of providing more predictable and adequate conference services to the meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States. The proposals made in paragraph 36 of document A/58/194 did not fulfil that request. The Group wished to underscore the importance of the aforementioned report, which must be issued promptly.

52. She noted with satisfaction the increased utilization of the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and expressed support for the request by ECA for substantial procurement of equipment to enable it to attract large-scale conventions with exhibits. The apparent inadequacy of resources for conference services at the United Nations Offices at Nairobi and Vienna was a cause for concern, however, as was the delay in filling the remaining vacancies in the Interpretation Section at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, particularly those posts that had been vacant for more than three years. All duty stations must be afforded equal treatment, and the Secretary-General must take the necessary steps to bring conference services at Nairobi up to the same level as those at other duty stations.

53. Notwithstanding the recent improvements, the Group remained concerned about the late issuance of some documents. It wished to reiterate the need for compliance with the six-week rule for distribution of documentation and the 10-week rule for the submission of documents by author departments for processing. Decisions on consolidating reports should be taken by the Main Committees of the General Assembly, and

any reduction in the length of reports must not affect either the quality of their presentation or their content. Given the importance of preserving the institutional memory of the United Nations, summary and verbatim records should be issued expeditiously in the six official languages. Lastly, she emphasized the need to strengthen the capacity of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to enable it to fulfil its mandates in an efficient and effective manner.

54. **Mr. Kramer** (Canada), speaking also on behalf of Australia and New Zealand, expressed strong support for the continuation of the reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management which the Secretary-General had set out in his report the previous year (A/57/289) and which the General Assembly had addressed in resolution 57/283 B. While the progress report presented to the Committee (A/58/213) gave a sense of the efforts being made on many fronts, it also indicated that actual progress had been variable. The range and complexity of the issues involved meant that slow progress was not necessarily a cause for alarm, but commitment to the process must be maintained. He wished to raise four issues in that connection.

55. Firstly, the aim of the reform strategy had been to improve services to the Member States and to increase efficiency, cost-effectiveness and productivity. It was therefore surprising that the progress report said nothing about productivity, either in terms of gains pursued or in terms of gains achieved. The sections of the report dealing with the use of technology, workload standards and performance measurement had not used the words "efficiency", "cost effectiveness" or "productivity" at all. The Member States and the Secretariat should affirm that productivity gains were an explicit aim of reform; otherwise considerable investment in technology could not be justified. With careful planning, nobody's employment should be jeopardized.

56. Secondly, efficiency and productivity must be measured in quantitative terms. The progress report failed to mention the request made by the General Assembly the previous year for the development of methods and indicators to assess the performance of conference services, particularly from the standpoint of cost-effectiveness, efficiency and productivity. Assessments had been requested for the current session. While client surveys were useful, they were

not a substitute for quantity analysis and the measurement of efficiency and productivity over time.

57. Thirdly, the Member States had agreed with the Secretariat in 2002 that current workload standards did not accurately measure productivity, and the General Assembly had remained open to more modern methods, such as unit costs of work processes. Two years had passed since the General Assembly, in resolution 56/253, had requested a review of workload standards, but, in the absence of new techniques, the existing techniques were the only ones available. The General Assembly should therefore be given performance information based on the existing standards for all duty stations.

58. Fourthly, the delegations for which he spoke looked forward to progress in the global management of conference services. The specific circumstances of each duty station must be considered, but the head of the Department must fulfil a leadership and accountability role.

59. **Ms. Udo** (Nigeria), speaking on behalf of the African Group, said that her group associated itself with the statement made by Morocco on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

60. The proposals of the Secretary-General provided a useful basis for improving the delivery of services in fields such as meeting support, technical secretariats, interpretation and document processing, and the African Group was ready to consider the implementation of measures to make intergovernmental activity more effective. It felt, however, that the Member States must be consulted fully before changes were made, and any action which might have adverse effects on the intergovernmental process must be avoided.

61. The African Group welcomed the efforts being made to improve the utilization of conference facilities as described in the report of the Secretary-General on the utilization of conference facilities and services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (A/57/809). It noted that the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) planned to hold the World Urban Forum every two years and that it might become a Governing Council event as from 2006. That would result in an increase in calendar meetings with interpretation services. Non-calendar meetings were also expected to increase.

62. The Secretary-General should maintain efforts to strengthen the role of the United Nations Office at Nairobi through greater use of its conference facilities and give it the same status as other duty stations. The African Group hoped that the comprehensive review of that Office's Division of Conference Services that was expected to be carried out during the biennium 2004-2005 would address the issue of resources, which had a direct impact on the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat).

63. The report of the Committee on Conferences for 2003 (A/58/32) indicated that the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in keeping with its decision 20/17, planned to hold special sessions in alternate years in different regions on a rotating basis. However, the General Assembly had stressed in several resolutions that United Nations bodies and agencies should adhere to the headquarters rule. That was particularly important at a time of reform. The African Group wished to know whether a decision of a Governing Council superseded decisions of the General Assembly.

64. The African Group took the view that the move towards global management of conference services should result in equal treatment in the allocation of resources and the upgrading of equipment. It shared the concern of the Committee on Conferences regarding the uneven introduction of new technology across duty stations and urged that steps should be taken to integrate modern technology at the United Nations Office at Nairobi.

65. The African Group noted that the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/58/194) indicated (para. 37) that the report on the utilization of conference facilities and services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (A/57/809) had yet to be considered by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ). It urged that the Advisory Committee should examine it as soon as possible, in accordance with the procedures outlined in its report on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit on building construction procedures of the United Nations organizations (A/36/643).

66. Also in connection with the United Nations Office at Nairobi, the African Group asked what steps would be taken before the end of 2003 to fill the long-standing vacancies for interpreters. The explanation

often given for that situation had become repetitive and unsatisfactory.

67. With regard to the use of the conference centre of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the African Group welcomed the 80-per-cent increase in occupancy achieved through reorganization and better facilities but felt that there should be more operational integration to enable ECA to fulfil additional duties and mandates, such as regional coordination of activities under the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

68. **Mr. Iosifov** (Russian Federation) said that his delegation was prepared to approve the draft biennial calendar of conferences and meetings of the United Nations for 2004-2005 and was pleased that, in preparing it, the Secretariat had taken into account the measures contained in General Assembly resolutions 53/208 A and 56/244 regarding Orthodox Good Friday.

69. The conference-servicing resources of the United Nations must be used in the best and most effective way possible. His delegation valued the efforts of the Committee on Conferences and the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management in that regard, and would continue to pay close attention to translation and interpretation issues. The established rules on the use of the Organization's official and working languages must be strictly adhered to, and Member States must be given equal treatment in terms of the quality and quantity of translation and interpretation.

70. Late issuance of documents was still a widespread concern; his delegation therefore favoured the establishment of an effective system of accountability in that regard within the Organization. Timely issuance also depended on productive discussion and on the workload of individual departments, and he welcomed the steps taken by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to develop a system of deadlines.

71. His delegation appreciated the active efforts made by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to improve conference services and increase accountability and cost-effectiveness, which would help to ensure that those services met the requirements of Member States and the modern age.

72. The aim of achieving integrated global management of conference services would demand close coordination and dialogue between the Secretariat and the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna on issues relating to accountability, budgets and staffing.

73. He welcomed the practice of holding meetings on terminology and translation issues between delegations and the language services. Such exchanges of views were useful and should be developed further.

74. Lastly, his delegation believed that the draft resolution on the pattern of conferences which the Committee on Conferences recommended in its report (A/58/32) could be adopted as it stood in order to speed up the work of the Fifth Committee.

75. **Mr. Eljy** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that his delegation associated itself with the statement made by Morocco on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

76. Conference services gave the best level of satisfaction when those responsible for delivering those services adhered to the mandates they had been given. One hallmark of the United Nations was its multilingual nature. Successful negotiation depended on the provision of documentation and interpretation in all official languages. All delegations must be treated equally in that regard. In the case of documentation, a balance must be struck between timely issuance and the maintenance of quality.

77. His delegation welcomed the reform being undertaken to improve the performance of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. It must follow the principles laid down and should itself be evaluated as it proceeded, reform did not mean restructuring for the sake of cost savings alone, but should be aimed at reorganizing the Department so that it could fulfil its mandate more effectively and provide a better level of service for Member States. All aspects of that mandate were equal, so resources must be allocated in a way that enabled all aspects to be addressed.

78. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management was encouraged to make use of new technology, but that was not an end in itself. The United Nations should not be treated as a testing ground. Technology should be used wherever it could improve the quality of conference services and help the Department to fulfil its mission. The use of voice

recognition, computer-aided translation, digital dictation and other applications was welcome, but the output must be monitored to ensure that quality was maintained.

79. The practice of printing on demand was a qualitative improvement aimed at reducing waste. However, it must not affect the quantity or quality of documentation and the Secretariat must continue to distribute hard-copy documents to the Member States in all languages. In considering the electronic availability of documents, the report of the Secretary-General on reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management had concluded (A/58/213, para. 34) that technological advances such as the use of new technology in conference rooms would ultimately reduce the requirement for hard-copy documents. However, that seemed to neglect the fact that such documents were the best tool for reporting and negotiation.

80. The same report offered a reason for the persistent late availability of summary records of meetings: lack of resources to translate the records from their original language. That was not a logically acceptable explanation. The budget was based on the needs which the Department communicated to the General Assembly. If those needs were communicated accurately, there should be no problem with resources. The Department had referred to possible technological solutions to the problem of summary records. His delegation would prefer it to put forward concrete proposals rather than to continue to describe the situation as bleak. Still on the subject of technology, the administrative instruction on United Nations Internet publishing (ST/AI/2001/5), which covered the use of the official languages of the Organization, should be re-examined.

81. His delegation continued to be concerned that, despite repeated requests, the Secretariat was only slowly filling the vacancies for Arabic-language interpreters at the United Nations Office at Nairobi. It was also concerned that the proportion of Arabic-language documents at the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) was decreasing, even though General Assembly resolution 57/283 B on the pattern of conferences had called for all documents to be made available in Arabic.

82. His delegation appealed for logic and dialogue to prevail in the discussions on conference services.

Delegations should take part in such discussions, understand each other's needs and be aware that some delegations were hampered by their limited technological and physical resources.

83. **Mr. Yamamoto** (Japan) welcomed the draft resolution on the pattern of conferences which the Committee on Conferences recommended in its report (A/58/32) and hoped that it would make the work of the Fifth Committee easier. On the question of the biennialization of the item entitled "Pattern of conferences", his delegation thought that, since the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management was being restructured, it might be useful to establish guidelines to move in the direction described.

84. His delegation noted the improvement in the timely issuance of documents as a result of the introduction of the slotting system, as described in the report of the Secretary-General on reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (A/58/213), but hoped to see further improvement. Rather than keeping summary records, it would prefer to pursue the alternatives referred to in paragraph 42 of that report.

85. Having carefully considered paragraphs 58 to 62 of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/58/194), his delegation believed that the current practice of providing advance copies of draft reports and other documents was consistent with administrative instruction ST/AI/2001/5 on United Nations Internet publishing and made the work of those bodies easier and more efficient. It should be maintained.

86. His delegation welcomed the reduction in vacancies in the Spanish and Chinese Translation Services, although there was still room for improvement. The problem could best be tackled through competitive examinations and enhanced mobility for language staff.

87. **Mr. Zhang Yishan** (China) noted the 75-per-cent overall rate of utilization of conference services at the four United Nations Offices and the 92-per-cent coverage of interpretation requests for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States. Although the 92-per-cent rate was 6 per cent lower than the figure for the previous period, it was still a considerable achievement, since such services were

provided through the reallocation of resources unused for other meetings.

88. The process of reform launched by the Secretary-General in 1997 had begun with measures focused on technical secretariat support and conference services and had moved on to focusing on full-system benefits by altering working methods, for example, the increased use of technology. The paramount concern should be to maintain a high quality of service for Member States. He hoped that the costs of ongoing reform would be fully reflected in the programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005.

89. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management had explored many remedies to resolve the chronic problem of the late issuance of documents, particularly by testing a slotting system. His delegation hoped that that would lead to improvements. Another measure, the introduction of page limits, seemed to have succeeded. In the first five months of 2003, over 90 per cent of reports originating in the Secretariat had complied with those limits.

90. Current workload standards dated back to 1975 and must be reviewed. The introduction of new technology made a review of those standards necessary, and his delegation supported the proposal of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management that a task force should be set up to perform a comprehensive study covering all major language-related functions. The client surveys conducted by the Department were a positive step, and should provide language staff with an incentive to maintain quality.

91. **Mr. Chen Jian** (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management), responding to questions that had been raised, said that better planning on the part of intergovernmental bodies offered the best chance for increased efficiency in the utilization of conference resources. Early preparation of work programmes so that documents could be slotted accordingly and advance notification of the cancellation of meetings were two of the best ways to improve the overall rate of utilization.

92. In response to the request of the Committee on Conferences for proposals regarding the scheduling of sessions of those bodies that had consistently underutilized the conference resources allocated to them, the Secretariat had identified two ways of accomplishing that task. One would be to reduce the

number of days allocated to the body concerned. Alternatively, the body concerned could reduce the number of its fully serviced meetings. The next step in that process would be to hold discussions with those bodies that had utilized less than 80 per cent of their conference-servicing resources during the previous three years to see if any of the suggested approaches could work for them. It was for the intergovernmental body in question, however, to make the decision.

93. With regard to the timely issuance of documents, the reform being undertaken by the Department was geared precisely towards improving the timeliness, quality and cost-effectiveness of the overall service provided to Member States and intergovernmental bodies through better planning. While the initial results were already encouraging, the Department was not yet satisfied and hoped that, with the cooperation of all the parties concerned, it would be in full compliance with the General Assembly's mandates within a few years. Surveys were planned to gauge the level of user satisfaction with the quality of the services provided by the Department. The study of workload standards to be undertaken by the Department would also look at ways of further improving quality. With regard to cost-effectiveness, the reforms were aimed at maintaining the same overall level of service at lower cost or increasing output using the same level of resources. Investments in information technology were expected to bring about gains in overall productivity, though not necessarily in individual units.

94. Another area of reform was the introduction of printing on demand, which was intended not to eliminate hard-copy distribution but to match supply and demand in the most cost-effective manner. While permanent missions were encouraged to take advantage of available online resources and to review their needs for hard-copy documentation, the Secretariat would continue to make hard-copy versions available for as long as necessary. The role of technology was not to reduce service but to improve it and the Department was even exploring the possibility of setting up special rooms equipped with the Official Document System (ODS), where documents could be accessed online and printed by delegates.

95. With regard to the provision of conference-servicing resources to regional groups, the current mandate was for such resources to be provided on an ad hoc basis, subject to availability. While the Department had done its utmost to meet the demand, in

particular by reallocating resources from cancelled meetings to service meetings of regional groups, approximately 10 per cent of meeting requests were still unmet. It was now for Member States to determine whether a separate entry should be included in the calendar of conferences to cater for the meetings of regional groups and to earmark resources for that purpose.

96. With regard to workload standards and productivity, enhancing productivity was an important component of the Department's reform. However, the traditional methods of measuring productivity, which had been formulated decades previously, without factoring in the use of information technology and without reflecting full-system benefits, could no longer accurately measure the performance of language staff. The study of workload standards would assist the Department in developing tools that were more meaningful for measuring performance.

97. With regard to the reduction in the length of reports, any such reduction should not affect the quality of the presentation or the content of the report and should be conducted in a non-selective manner. The aim was to produce more focused and action-oriented reports containing clear recommendations. The results achieved thus far with the consolidation of reports were very encouraging and the initiative would be continued.

98. On the subject of the filling of vacancies for interpreters at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, the Chinese, French and Russian booths were fully staffed, while an interpreter had already been recruited to fill the vacancy in the English booth and should be reporting for duty shortly. The two vacancies in the Spanish booth would also be filled in the near future. Problems were being encountered, however, in staffing the Arabic booth and, to that end, a training programme was being established with universities to prepare qualified interpreters. A related problem was how to ensure that conference services were fully utilized at Nairobi. To that end, the cooperation of all stakeholders was essential.

99. Lastly, with regard to the problem of summary records, the backlog could be measured either by the number of meetings for which summary records had not been issued or by the number of language versions that had not been completed. For some bodies, summary records were still pending for meetings that

had been held as far back as 1998. In every case, the original summary record had been completed, but, in compliance with the rule requiring simultaneous distribution of documents in all six official languages, issuance was being delayed because one or more language versions had not been completed. Summary records were assigned for translation as and when capacity was available. Since they constituted post-session documentation, however, summary records necessarily received less priority than pre-session and in-session parliamentary documents. The problem was therefore essentially one of inadequate translation capacity. To alleviate the situation, the Department had taken, or intended to take, such measures as the redeployment of resources, where possible, to the translation of summary records and the synchronization of the translation of summary records. A sustainable solution to the problem, however, would require the strengthening of the staff of the six Translation Services or the provision of additional funds to outsource the translation of summary records. Another option would be to replace summary records with digital sound recordings. It was for Member States, however, to decide on the course of action they deemed most appropriate. Without a decision on their part, the unsatisfactory situation with regard to summary records would continue.

100. **Ms. Udo** (Nigeria), speaking on behalf of the African Group, sought clarification of the relationship between the staffing of language posts at Nairobi and the upgrading of conference facilities at that duty station. She would also welcome information on the status of the report on the improvement and modernization of the conference facilities at Nairobi, the preparation of which should be expedited to enable the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions to consider it.

The meeting rose at 12.40 p.m.